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A Talk With Edwin Meese

Presidential counselor Edwin Meese III was recently asked by Meg Greenfield, editorial page editor, to elaborate some controversial remarks he had made concerning criminal justice.

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Q: There was another question: what you said about reporters being receivers of "stolen property"—fences for classified leaks and so on. What did you mean?

A: What I said was that when the revelation of clearly classified information would harm the national security, I thought it was improper for reporters or anyone to use it because in effect it is stolen property. For someone to use stolen documents and make them public when that would harm the security of the nation was, I thought, the wrong thing to do.

Q: You think there should be criminal penalty attached?

A: Well, I haven't looked into it that far to see to what extent it should be made criminal. I think there may already be some criminal penalties as in the person who receives or uses stolen property.

Q: But haven't you found since you have been here that there is too much classification?

A: Oh, yes, I think there is way too much classification, and I think that's one of the things that has given rise to the relative freedom with which some of the reporters use this material, and I think that's one of the problems of government—that is, the overclassification of documents. You really should only classify something if its revelation would actually harm the national security. Not that it would embarrass someone or make someone look bad.

EXCERPTED